

HÖGSKOLAN VÄST

Learning ‘theory’ at university and ‘practice’ in the workplace:

**A problematisation of the theory-practice terminology that the
dualistic design of Work-integrated Learning institutionalises**

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Abstract

Title: Learning ‘theory’ at university and ‘practice’ in the workplace: A problematisation of the theory-practice terminology that the dualistic design of Work-integrated Learning institutionalises

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Work-integrated Learning (WIL) is a label for a form of higher education whose usual design in many degree programmes involves splitting students’ education into on-campus training and work placements. This thesis focuses on a theory-practice terminology that is reflected in this WIL design and spreads a dualistic thinking with a basic message. The message is that on-campus and placement-based training teach you opposite bases for learning a profession, namely an abstract research-based knowledge called ‘theory’ and a concrete work called ‘practice’. This thesis argues that when this dualistic thinking is spread to students, it primarily contributes to the creation, but also to the bridging of the gap between these forms of training that the said WIL design seeks to bridge for them, the so-called *theory-practice gap*. Based on this argument, the thesis has two overall aims: to problematise (1) the dualistic nature of spoken and written instances of the theory-practice terminology and of the usual WIL design, and (2) the possibility of establishing physical and/or virtual countersites to the usual WIL design. Such sites are not established institutional arrangements at present. The idea is that they should be set up not to embody the dualistic notion that theory is the abstract research-based knowledge brought from campus to ‘practice’, but to offer a non-dualistic experience that would provide a key opportunity to avoid creating the so-called theory-practice gap for students. I refer to an experience of how theory is a form of knowledge that already exists in – and is created through – the daily work practices of a profession in various shapes and forms.

To achieve the first aim, this thesis conducts Foucault-inspired discourse analyses of how four ideas of the theory-practice terminology spread dualistic messages. The ideas are explored together in three studies. Study I explores two ideas that interviewed students voiced when asked about the usual WIL design. These are the idea of theory *vs.* practice as the point of departure for learning and the idea of theory *and* practice as harmonious points of departure for learning. Using a genealogical discourse analysis, study II traces the idea of *academia and the real world* while study III examines the dualistic meaning that the theory-practice terminology ascribes to the graduate employability idea, backwards in time from the present. The empirical basis for this consists of present and past documents that three higher education institutions have used to promote the Cooperative Education (Co-op) model of the usual WIL design to their prospective and existing Co-op students. Together, the three studies show how the four ideas include accounts that spread antagonistic and/or harmonious messages. The former messages imply that on-campus and placement-based training do not combine well because ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ are not a good match, while the latter imply that these forms of training combine perfectly because ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ are a perfect match. The thesis concludes that antagonistic messages only contribute to creating the so-called theory-practice gap for students, whereas harmonious messages contribute to both creating and bridging the gap. To achieve the second aim, the three studies introduce a discussion on a) what countersites to the usual WIL design could look like and b) how they could possibly avoid creating this gap. This discussion is developed in the discussion chapter of this thesis, where these countersites are referred to as *third places for learning professions*. A focus of this discussion is to problematise the fact that sites of this nature are difficult to establish because the theory-practice terminology they must avoid incorporating to offer a non-dualistic experience is so established that it is easily used out of habit when trying to establish such sites.